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# Penetrating Seriousness: The Joker in *Stella Dallas*<sup>1</sup>

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*In this paper I will discuss the role of an archetype known as the 'joker', 'trickster' or even the 'fool'. To bring this role into focus I will look at Ed Munn's role in Stella Dallas, as he represents this joker persona. A joker is someone who is capable of mocking what society holds dear; he laughs at any display of seriousness. Most often, society avoids such people, but at same time there is the desire to have them around. If there is no one to make fun of society's actions then the society risks becoming a parody of itself. In such a state, the society becomes an ice sculpture we must tiptoe around. The role of the joker becomes crucial at this stage, as he is the only one capable of breaking this sculpture. He doesn't obey the rules and he doesn't shy away from making fun of the seriousness we attend to.*

Chattering finch and water-fly  
Are not merrier than I;  
Here among the flowers I lie  
Laughing everlastingly.

No: I may not tell the best;  
Surely, friends, I might have guessed  
Death was but the good King's jest,  
It was hid so carefully.

—THE SKELETON, *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*, G.K. Chesterton, 1900

## INTRODUCTION

A joker is someone who is capable of providing entrainment to society, making them laugh at the seriousness they adhere to. He uses laughter to challenge their standards and their valuable ideologies. While the joker appears to be a foolish man, a hanger-on used by society to release their worries, he actually brings more to the table. In many of Shakespeare's plays the joker has a very important role, as he is the only one capable of penetrating the seriousness and, at times, he is capable of penetrating with seriousness the heart of society, exposing its nature.

In *King Lear* the Fool is the most trustworthy advisor to the King, who uses the Fool at his court to make satiric but equally serious observant remarks. The Fool has a similar role to the Greek chorus in this regard; they were a group of individuals whose role was to comment on what was going in the play in a similar way to a narrator. Their role was to provide supplementary and background information to the audience. King Lear's joker has a similar role but a bit more importance; the Fool does not only deliver information to him but also functions as a 'voice of reason' for the King. The Fool is loyal to King Lear and uses his humour to help the King through his sorrow, while using reason to combat his increasing madness. The Fool is the only one who is allowed to be honest with the King.

The King gives the Fool unlimited licence to make jokes and say whatever he chooses; in return, the Fool ensures that his observations are accurate and honest. In some ways, this joker acts as part of the King's conscience, like a satiric voice of reason when the king is about to go into a state of madness. We can see, then, that the role of the joker is essential in *King Lear*, as his role paves the way for an authentic discussion which is both open and receptive. The word 'fool' derives from the Latin word *follis* which means 'bag of wind' or something that contains air or breath. This seems apt, as, when we are angry and about to descend into a state of madness (perhaps not clinical madness) we are told to take deep breaths and calm down. The role of the joker provides this; he knows when individuals are taking the game of life too seriously. He reminds us to let go of the intense madness and surrender to the natural process of breathing. In some ways the joker plays the game of society in the most natural way: he does not pause to consider words or hold his breath to avoid asking questions that disrupt the orderly process; he simply speaks his mind. The title of this paper thus has a double meaning: (1) breaking through or disrupting seriousness and (2) seriousness that penetrates. While these two statements sound vague for now, I shall return to them in a little while. In the following sections I would like to show how the role of Ed Munn in *Stella Dallas* (1937) delivers these two stages as his relation with Stella evolves in the film.

## STELLA

First impressions count for a lot and they often pave the way for the coming scenes in films, establishing the ways in which the storyline of a film is told. In *Stella Dallas* (1937) the film starts with Stella and ends with her. This is to let us know that it is Stella's story and voice we must listen and attend to as an audience. At the beginning of the film we are shown that Stella is from a working-class family and desires to escape the life of working-class people. We are shown she is a beautiful woman who is ambitious but irritated by her surroundings. She longs for a life of excitement and she does not want to simply adhere to the life her mother is leading. This is shown as a dull and miserable life, from which she desires liberation. Stella has an eye for beautiful things and she has an understanding of how to attract them. She uses her beauty to attract Stephen Dallas, a handsome man who comes from a rich family. Soon enough, she is married to Stephen and has a daughter (Laurel).

On her return from the hospital after her daughter's birth, Stella wants to attend a social function. Her husband says no at first but soon enough he agrees and they attend the party. At the party, Stella meets Ed Munn, a cheerful man who appears to be making everyone laugh. Stella likes Ed Munn and she laughs and dances with him. However, her husband frowns at their interaction and asks Stella to think of how it looks to others. As the film continues, we notice that Stella is not completely driven by beauty and appearance, as assumed from the beginning; in fact she stands against it. We notice this when her husband Stephen tries to show that Ed Munn is no good and does not fit into the lifestyle they have, but she refuses to accept her husband's view and does not judge Ed Munn by his appearance, according to a class-based evaluation. She stays loyal to Ed Munn and lets him behave as he pleases. Her relations with Ed Munn put her in many difficulties, as her husband is wary of Ed Munn, while the society around her questions her relations with him. She is accused of adultery, while her platonic relationship with Ed Munn continues. We see that Stella suffers an inner disruption of life, so

that her desire to receive liberation is yet to arrive. There is a void in her life, but she has a strong sense of will as she rejects her husband's and society's desires to make her fit into acceptable social norms. It seems that Stella does not desire the tastes of the upper class; rather she is struggling with an existential crisis: she is unable to find her feet on the ground, both because she does not feel at home and because the people around ensure she knows she is an outsider. Stella busies herself with her daughter, says she has not left the house for two months and, when Ed Munn asks her why, she responds by saying that all she thinks about is her daughter and that she cannot possibly have fun without her.

The film moves forwards a number of years and now her daughter is grown up and she has adopted the class of her father. She is softly spoken, wears simple clothes and is well-read and she takes social codes into consideration. Stella is happy with her daughter and lives her life by ensuring her daughter is happy but the more her daughter grows up the more Stella faces society's bitter and cruel remarks. She is still considered an outsider. On her daughter's birthday Stella wants to go shopping to buy remaining party preparations, and she is accompanied by Ed Munn. While they are on the train Ed Munn says to Stella 'Do you want to have fun...' and he puts itching powder among the respectable occupants of the train carriage. Stella's actions are witnessed by Laurel's teachers, who whisper about her and Ed Munn's laughter and body contact; apparently shocked by Stella's act of 'fun' the teachers cancel coming to Laurel's party. Both Stella and Laurel are sad but they support each other to overcome the moment.

Stella is being worn down by society and her husband requests a divorce. Upset by her husband and society's criticism, she decides she will give her daughter everything the upper class is offering by accepting her husband's divorce if he increases her allowance. Stella seems to be going into state of madness and we notice this in her sense of fashion. Stella uses her appearance as way of contesting social codes and in this she is ahead of society by using her taste as liberation. Cavell writes that her taste is in a 'sense of her discovering language, giving herself words' (Cavell, 1996, p. 260). While Stella and Laurel go to a society club, Stella dresses as what Cavell calls a 'Christmas tree' and Laurel is so embarrassed for her mother that she asks to go back home. On the train back home Stella hears what people have been saying about her and learns why her daughter was in a hurry to return. As Stella struggles to find her voice in the face of society's criticism she realises she must part ways with her daughter. She hands her daughter over to Mrs Morrison, Stephen's new partner. At first, her daughter is disheartened about the revelation that her mother wants her to move to her father and Mrs Morrison and returns to her mother. Stella goes to Ed Munn to fake a relationship with him but he is passed out in his flat. Even so, Stella manages to convince Laurel by herself that she wanted her out of the way, as she wants a life with Ed Munn. Shocked by her mother's actions Laurel leaves her to start own life. Again, the film takes us into a new leap and now we witness Laurel getting married and Stella watching from outside through a window as she bears witness to her daughter's wedding. Stella seems to be feeding off the connection as she watches, and when she is finally ready to turn away, she lets go of it. In some respects, it shows that Stella is finally free from society's criticism, while the ending of film adds references to Plato's allegory of the cave<sup>2</sup>.

## ED MUNN

Let us now look at how Ed Munn's role becomes valuable for the film. I find it rather clever that

Ed Munn's role is introduced to us just as Stella's life seems to become serious. At the start of the film we are shown that Stella is a young woman who wants to have fun and, as she is losing track of her original desire, Ed Munn appears in the film. His relationship with Stella is regressive, based on 'having fun' and we witness many such scenes: for instance, the itching powder and a scene when he visits Stella after she gives birth, with two other people, to remind her she can still have fun.

Who is Ed Munn, though? We actually know nothing of him besides that he likes betting on horse races and he acts and speaks as he pleases without taking anything into consideration. He does not appear to belong in any class or have family, so there is nothing for others to judge him on; he is completely free from social evaluations. No one worries about his manner because no one takes him seriously—he is just there. The function of Ed Munn is not purely entertainment; he is not simply there to make us laugh before or after a tense scene. Rather, Ed Munn is an individual who is capable of making inappropriate remarks at the right time, meaning he can destroy or break the tension of a situation.

Let us consider some scenes: Stella and her daughter are preparing for Christmas, while they are doing this Ed Munn arrives drunk and with chicken. At the same time, Stephen arrives. Stella tenses because of the arrival of her husband, and she pushes Ed Munn into the kitchen where he falls around with his chicken. Finally, Stella manages to get rid of Ed Munn and she prepares herself for Stephen, in a way that is pleasing to his eye. Stephen, seeing this change, is happy and he wants to spend Christmas with Laurel and Stella. As he about to make the arrangement, in comes Ed Munn and this disturbs Stephen. Ed Munn is capable of poking fun at Stephen's earnestness, making this the worst type of criticism to receive as Stephen is secure in his place. There is discomfort when others question what you thought was sacred—it is extremely demoralising when others make fun of this. Ed Munn sees society as a game, so he plays the game and when he witnesses others who take the game seriously with a stern and pious expression, he laughs at them.

The game here then should not be understood as simply an entertainment; it is not frivolous. Rather, the idea of the game is as the natural cycle of things. Let us think about music, for instance, music has a particular destination; it is not aimed at the future but it travels in time even though it has no goal in life. At the same time, though, there is purpose to music because every phrase unfolds itself for listeners to connect with and perceive their relationship to earlier and later phrases. Music is there to dance with and we dance *to* dance. In the same way, every stage of life has its own purpose. This does not mean our purposes in life are secure; rather they are developing just like a tree which needs new seeds every spring. This is what Ed Munn offers Stella a reminder of: she is present as he makes her laugh and enjoy herself; he takes her away from her sadness for a moment. He is the only one capable of reminding Stella of this, as everyone around her is stuffy. Then, as Stella regains her voice, Ed Munn disappears.

## INTERRUPTING THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE AUDIENCE

Let us look at how analysing the role of Ed Munn opens ways to discuss the seriousness of the audience. As an audience, we are called on to pay attention as our gaze is directed in certain ways, so that we may trail Stella's journey. In trailing this journey, we become absorbed in a very critical way. We give the film meanings which it might not necessarily be leading towards.

When we witness Stella's life in the film we can see she is facing serious questions and she must find her own voice. In search of her voice she faces some tragic and comic moments but there is a parallel between Stella's seriousness and the audience's: we as an audience must decide whether we take the film seriously or whether we consider our life afterwards. While it seems easy to watch and move along after watching with friends or alone at home, it is difficult to move on when we are sitting in a classroom. A student seeks to become critical to show an understanding of the film or uses the film to draw on important political discussions. In this, they seek to meet the criteria, yet, by doing this, the student forgets to let the film be; to let it evolve on its own terms, acknowledging the voice of film, which at times can be accessible and at other times feel like a stranger. Accepting the stranger-ness of film shows the viewer as a sincere individual, who is capable of accepting the different feelings the film evokes. The problem of seeing films as a way gaining of critical skills is one of missing the wider values of films; we see these arguments in the work of Stanley Cavell and Noel Carroll. Cavell argues that films are there in some sense for us to regain our 'human voice' (Cavell, 1994, p. 58). Asserting our criticism is a form of serious expression, as Adrian Skilbeck (2018) writes. The criteria make room for serious discussion but these discussions always hold us responsible because, as we express our words, we are expressing them as if we are speaking for the whole audience; we speak as if we have that authority. Cavell argues 'when I voice them, [the criteria] I do so, or take myself to do so as a member of that group, a representative human' (Cavell, 1994, p. 18). Our words are thus not simply ours and, to do justice to the language we speak we must allow things to be, letting it be a part of the natural process rather than disrupting it with thinking which might not always account for the wider audience.

## WHY A JOKER?

The joker is someone capable of reminding the audience of their finitude; the character shows them that not everything is within our grasp, regardless what angles or background criteria are set. Seeing the joker as a teacher or even as a student in this context will present serious concerns for society. Educational institutions will have a sense of uneasiness in accepting a joker into their environment; teachers and students feel that they must never poke fun at learning, since it is time for them to be serious. Both the teachers' and students' minds are fixed with certain standards, and these standards are associated with absolute perfection. Language, however, is not simply fixed, and is not an end goal. We must see it, rather, as a cycle of constant circulation. The joker acknowledges this circulation of language and he simply laughs with it. This laughter shows that the joker abandons any control, finding his freedom. The prophetic voice of the joker allows both Stella and the audience to see the voiceless nature of one community and it opens the possibility of attending to another one, were one is heard. The joker challenges us in a funny way which penetrates seriousness. The joker's seriousness is one which delivers an important message; he teaches us to let things be and learn when we should leave a thought and move on. What this teaches us when we are watching films is that there is no list of things we must tick off for it to be valuable or provide 'wholesome' ideas which are good for the student to walk away with. Rather, it shows the cultural traps which set out to capture students' passion and desires.

The joker as teacher, then, has two roles: one is to help us locate or create spaces that allow

infinite plenitude beyond the outer crust of convention. The criteria set for films can provide a false, one-way viewing, which limits the room for imagination, self-expression and emotions. The joker's role is to awaken the spiritual creativity of the other, to remind us of our humanity. The joker becomes a prophet who is capable of delivering a message, but how can we know he is not simply tricking us? Christian wisdom warns: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7: 15–16). Each fruit appears in its right season and we must wait for it to show itself before we inspect the consequences. Critical morality derives from intelligently reflecting on the consequences of moral actions. This does not mean the students are trapped in the present; they can explore consequences by imagining the future and using the voice of joker, so the student and teacher can both use his sharp observation on what he sees but he does not just tell his side; he allows others to find their own voice. He lets them be and does not oppose anything in them; he is simply receptive to the inner call of the other. In such cases the viewing of *Stella Dallas* always requires us to simply let the film be without asserting any given meaning. In seeing the film this way, we notice things which might be shadowed by our critical eyes.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Naoko Saito and Paul Standish for delivering a thought provoking lecture on voice.
2. The ending of *Stella Dallas* has been seen as sacrifice, a mother who is leaving her daughter, so that her daughter can remain happy. While this is one possible way of seeing the film, it is important that we allow different interpretations of the ending to emerge. Another possible interpretation, as I have explained in this paper, is that Stella has found the strength to be on her own. Although the direction of the future seems uncertain we can see that she is ready to face it.

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